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Transnational history in Ottoman perspective: the experience of the Ottoman Urban Studies Seminar at ZMO Berlin

Ulrike Freitag, Nora Lafi

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This seminar was created in 2006 at ZMO (Zentrum Moderner Orient) as part of our »Compared Cities« initiative, within the framework of the EUME (Europe in the Middle-East / the Middle-East in Europe) programme at Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin. The intent was to build a new space of discussion on present stakes in Ottoman urban history open to both the international fellows of our programme, international guests, and the Berlin public specialized not only in Ottoman but also in transnational and conceptual history. Transnational history had also been a major focus at ZMO for several years, an experience on which we were able to capitalize. From the beginning it was clear to us that a transnational and comparative perspective had to draw not only on Ottomanist erudition, but should integrate some of the major current approaches and questions in (mainstream, i. e. mostly Western) History and the Social Sciences. We felt that Ottomanist scholarship, strong as it is, at times suffers from a strong culturalist vision that has contributed to build Ottoman studies as a separate field. We wanted to discuss not only the pertinence, but also the inertia of notions, which can be exemplified in the ideas of importation or modernization, and wanted to suggest a shift in perspective, with a focus on circulation and mediation, which play a major role in discussions on transnational and entangled history. If Ottoman studies had been enriched during the last decades by methodological impulses, such as microhistory or history from below, first applied on other fields, it seemed to us that in present debates in the profession, and notably in the field of transnational history, the Ottoman case could this time be the base for the

development of new methodological and paradigmatical suggestions, pertaining, for example, to the discussion of the circulation of modernization impulses or the nature of cosmopolitan societies.

For these reasons, we chose for the first year of the seminar to focus on the question of urban government, as it seemed to us that this topic was the object of a lasting sedimentation of strong culturalist visions. In other words, the reform of urban government methods in the Ottoman Empire was still read with the dialectics of the importation paradigm: modern solutions imported from Europe applied to a panorama lacking any solid basis for the development of local self government. Ottoman studies had been affected by both a long ignorance of premodern forms of local government and a unidirectional reading of modernization processes. With a collective set of questionings and an examination of what happened in Ottoman cities from the Balkans to Anatolia and from North Africa to the Middle-East or the Arabian Peninsula, we were able to begin to discuss this vision. In return, we also suggested some new directions of research, such as the inner-Ottoman circulation of reformist ideas, the link between old regime forms and modernized forms, and a more complex relationship to Europe.

Logically, cosmopolitanism was the focus of the second year of the seminar. Our idea was that cosmopolitanism could no longer be either a descriptive tool for urban societies with plural communal components, nor a vague concept pending somewhere between Kant and Pheng Cheah, but had to be the object of a critical conceptual examination linked to the question of the urban gover-

nance of diversity. For this reason, the Ottoman case seemed to us a perfect field for an exploration of intellectual stakes that were related to a broader panorama. In the seminar, the focus was then on both the precise Ottoman mechanics of governance of diversity and on the potential conceptual consequences this attention to Ottoman towns could lead to in the field of transnational history. Important discussions also took place about the possible roots of a specifically Ottoman urban public sphere.

The third year of the seminar, which started in the autumn of 2008, is on everyday life in Ottoman towns. Here, the stake seems to be to confront the strong methodological heritage, related to the whole season of Marxist, post-Marxist, cultural and post-cultural studies everyday life has been the support of, with present questionings. The nature of urban microcosms or a renewed vision of the dynamic link between space, society and the individual are among these questionings. The hypothesis is that Ottoman studies might allow to discuss the consistence of some of the heritages everyday life studies are rich of and to insert a

transnational perspective into discussions about urban societies.

From the experience of this seminar, what seems important to us is to use the complexity of Ottoman urban situations as elements to be inserted into broader discussions in transnational history. At the core of all these investigations is the historical development of nationalisms, which have contributed so much to our perspective on history through the development of national historiographies on what was once one Empire. In the end, after having tried to introduce nuances into the perception of the history of Ottoman urban societies, this subject too will have to be the object of a renewed shared examination, a process in which the Ottoman experience could prove crucial for the discussion of some dominant paradigms.

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